

Health

Protesters against COVID-19 vaccine mandates say they're pro-freedom, 'not anti-vax'

Across Canada, people protested against requiring COVID-19 vaccination for certain jobs and activities

[Philip Lee-Shanok](#) · CBC News · Posted: Sep 03, 2021 8:48 PM ET | Last Updated: September 12, 2021



Hundreds of people gathered in front of Toronto police headquarters on Thursday for a rally opposing mandatory vaccination at the police service. The day before, the Ontario government announced a vaccine passport system that will go into effect on Sept. 22. (Evan Mitsui/CBC)

As more provinces introduce proof-of-vaccination certificates, protests ramped up against public health restrictions and COVID-19 vaccine mandates this week in cities across Canada.

On Wednesday, [Quebec became the first province](#) to require digital or paper proof of vaccination to access non-essential services and [Ontario recently announced](#) the details of its vaccine passport system, which will come into effect on Sept. 22. [Manitoba will implement](#) a similar system on Sept. 3, while [B.C.'s takes effect on Sept. 13](#).

At a rally in Toronto on Thursday, protesters called it an infringement on their freedom of movement to require proof of COVID-19 vaccination to access places like restaurants, movie theatres and gyms. (Other indoor places, such as schools, grocery stores and places of worship are not included in the provincial vaccine mandates.)

Hundreds of people gathered outside police headquarters to demonstrate in support of the Toronto Police Association's opposition to mandatory COVID-19 vaccination as a condition of employment, which the police service [announced](#) last week.

- [Medical groups denounce bullying, attacks on health-care workers as protests target hospitals](#)

Demonstrations outside hospitals were held this week in many major centres, including St. John's, Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg, Victoria and Vancouver, as well as in smaller communities.





The protesters who spoke to CBC News said they were not opposed to vaccines in general, but objected to making them mandatory as a condition of employment or certain activities. (Evan Mitsui/CBC)

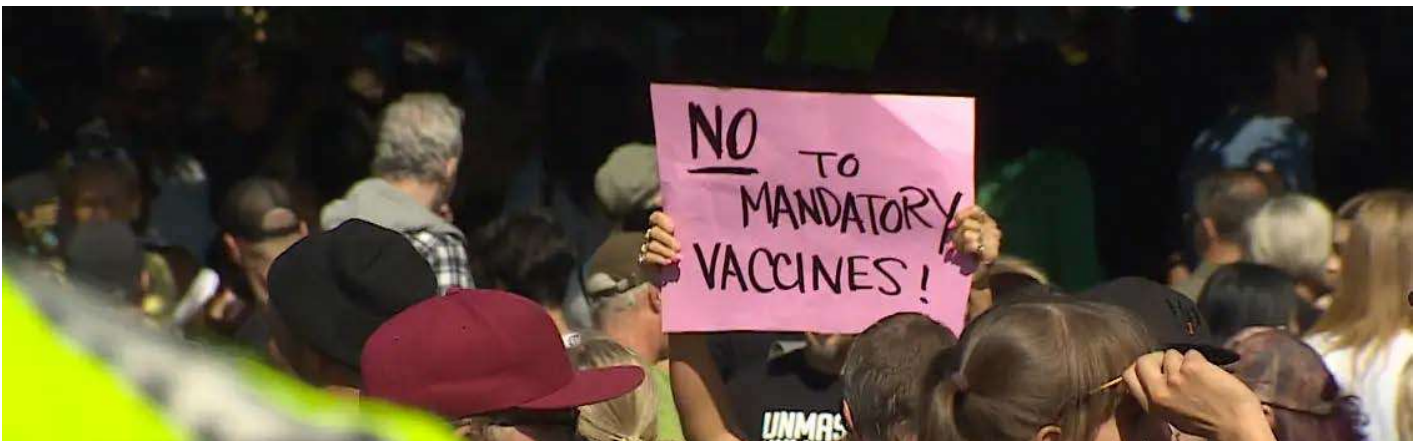
In Toronto, two sisters from Mississauga showed up with their children. CBC News has agreed not to name them because they work in education and fear repercussions.

"This is about the police standing up for their rights — I think that what's happening right now could lead us down a very slippery slope," said the elder sister.

"I think that there's quite an overreach happening right now with governments demanding you to do this or you could lose your job."

While some at the rally were opposed to vaccines in general, those who spoke to CBC News said their concerns are more about the erosion of personal freedom — and what they see as excessive government control — than the COVID-19 vaccines themselves. They spoke about their "natural and legal" right to refuse a mandatory vaccine and that requiring vaccine proof would create a two-tier society.

WATCH | Rally against COVID-19 vaccine passports draws thousands in Vancouver:



Thousands rally against COVID-19 vaccine passports in Vancouver



11 months ago | 0:50

Similar rallies took place outside hospitals in other cities across B.C.

'What are they gonna tell you next?'

The younger of the two Mississauga sisters said the family escaped a communist regime and came to Canada — now she says she's ready to uproot her family, possibly returning to Europe or perhaps emigrating to Japan.

"We're basically ready to sell the house and go, we've been purging things from the house, we've been selling things we are ready to leave," she said. "This has nothing to do with vaccines, this has to do with a loss of personal freedoms. As soon as the government can tell you what you can do with your body — what are they gonna tell you next?"



Thousands of people protesting against vaccination passports and the COVID-19 vaccine gathered near Vancouver City Hall and Vancouver General Hospital on Wednesday. (Gian Paolo Mendoza/CBC)

Similar to other rallies in Halifax and Calgary, protesters expressed a deep distrust of experts and the government. And they say they feel belittled, dismissed and ignored by the mainstream media.

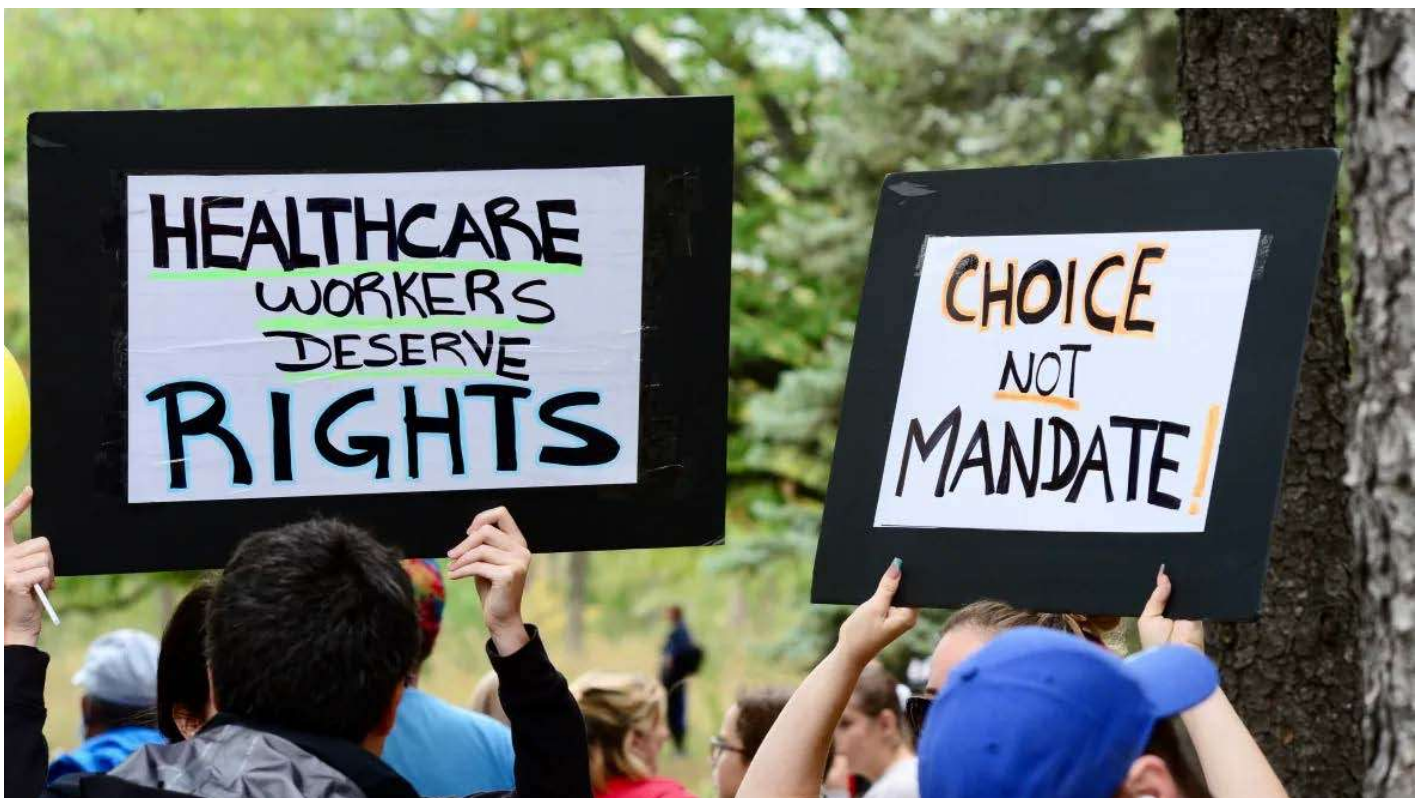
Several protesters refused to speak to CBC News saying their concerns would not be heard.

- [**Chief public health officer says Canada could see 15,000 cases daily by October if vaccinations don't increase**](#)
- [**'My last straw': Vancouver paramedic on brink of quitting due to hospital protests**](#)

For those who did, their concerns weren't only about rights in the workplace, but their rights and freedoms guaranteed in the Canadian Charter, [Section 7](#) which includes "the right to life, liberty and security of the person."

"I'm not anti-vax or anything, but I'm really pro-choice, in everything. So I think it was important to come out, because I feel like everyone should have a choice," said Ashley Gilpin, who refuses to get vaccinated.

"Our bodies, our choice. And if we lose that choice, that freedom to choose, what do we have left?"



In Montreal, thousands of people gathered on Aug. 28 protesting public health measures, including the vaccination passport system and mandatory vaccines for health-care workers. (Jean-Claude Taliana/CBC)

Danny Cabral is a mechanic at the Toronto Transit Commission who opposes the transit agency's new policy requiring its employees be fully vaccinated against COVID-19.

"It's about personal freedom, personal autonomy," he said.

He said like the police union, the TTC's unions are trying to fight back.

Right to choose can have consequences

Puneet Tiwari, a lawyer at Levitt Sheikh, says employers could communicate new workplace policies that include being vaccinated against COVID-19 and then dismiss employees with cause if they refuse. He expects challenges using the protection of individuals' rights under applicable human rights legislation.

"You will always have the choice, but that choice may have consequences," he said.

"Just like freedom of speech. If you say something inappropriate, it could have consequences. It's the same thing. You make the choice to get the vaccine or not. If you don't get it you may not be allowed back into your workplace."

Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's chief public health officer, said Friday that unvaccinated people are 12 times more likely to be infected and [36 times more likely to be hospitalized](#) if they get infected.

Tam said there is an urgent need for more people between the ages of 18 and 39 to get vaccinated against COVID-19 to reduce the impact of the delta variant. "We have a window of opportunity to rapidly accelerate vaccine uptake and close the protection gap in younger age groups," she said.

About 7.6 million eligible Canadians still have not been fully vaccinated, Dr. Howard Njoo, Canada's deputy chief public health officer, said Friday. Outbreaks of COVID-19 among this group are many times more likely than outbreaks among the fully vaccinated, Njoo said.

Some bioethicists are concerned that COVID-19 vaccine mandates and certificates [will limit some people's freedoms and create a two-tiered society](#), in a way that will especially hit the most vulnerable in society.

Many of this week's largest protests were held outside hospitals in British Columbia, where thousands of people demonstrated in half a dozen cities.

And while the Canadian Medical Association, Ontario Medical Association and Ontario Hospital Association criticized the demonstrations, B.C. Civil Liberties Association said [protesting is a fundamental right shared by all Canadians](#).

The CMA and OMA also say doctors have been bullied online and in person and physically attacked and that in some cases demonstrations have interfered with some people's access to health care.

With files from Peter Zimonjic and The Canadian Press

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